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P.E.N. Congress Discusses Obstacles Facing Writer in Mechanized World

By HARRY GILROY

Writers at the International P.E.N. Congress in New York yesterday devoted thousands of words to modern forces inimical to their craft. This stirred a publisher who is participating to admonish them:

"One necessity for a writer is to be tough-minded."

The publisher was William Jovanovich, president of Harcourt Brace and World. He is a member of P.E.N.—an organization of poets, playwrights, essayists and novelists—because he is an author in his own right.

His admonition was well received. Most of the 650 writers attending the congress evidently feel, judging from their conversation, that an author must resist outside pressures and do his work the way he knows is best.

Writer's Troubles Are Topic

However, in two panel discussions that went on simultaneously in two halls of the Loeb Student Center of New York University, the emphasis was on things that interfere with the writer's independence. Robert Goffin of France, who adroitly conducted one panel talk in both French and English, defined its subject as "the confrontation of the writer with the difficulties he comes across."

Elmer Rice, the American playwright, indicated that the most important difficulties were not new, since he had written an essay 14 years ago on the industrialization of the writer by films, radio and television. He read from his article at length. Finally an English writer stood up in the audience and asked Mr. Goffin to call a halt.

Bogdan Pogacnik of Yugoslavia took up the theme by saying that because of the tech-

nology of mass production the writer was usually reduced to doing daily salaried work. He urged that the writer should continue to be independent "in his morality."

Phillip A. Hope-Wallace of England spoke of "a well known magazine that employs hundreds of good writers," but boils down their work with the result "usually of falsifying the individual contributions."

New Media Found Wanting Paola Milano of Italy suggested there was something in the nature of the new communications media that interfered with the writer. It would be impossible to translate "The Divine Comedy" into Bantu because of the scantiness of that language's vocabulary, he said, "and similarly certain media make it impossible to translate a masterpiece into them."

James Ngugian observer from Kenya, retorted to that argument by saying that Bantu had a large vocabulary. He added that "we in Africa do not think that art is sacred, so there is any medium to reach our people, many of whom cannot read, we will use it."

Jean Bloch-Michel of France expressed doubt that the mass media hurt the writer's independence of mind. Mr. Jovanovich took up that thought with the observation that many writers were subject to "a kind of sentimentality about their role."

He said there were more readers today than ever before and that more good writers were earning a living at writing than in the past. He said he would have agreed with Mr. Rice about the unfortunate effects of the industrialization of the writer 14 years ago, when Mr. Rice's article appeared, but he now considered this to be a

misreading of the effects of mechanization."

Rosamond Lehmann, the English novelist, said "the trouble with writers is their self-consciousness." This spreads the idea, she said, that all writers write with one eye on the public rather than because of some imaginative compulsion that really gives pleasure to themselves.

Melvin Lasky, American co-editor of the British magazine Encounter, said that one influence antagonistic to writers was the "hopped-up use of words" spreading through all parts of society. "It is a case of LSD—language, superfluous and degenerated," he said.

He quoted a public official as saying "Let's join the revolution racket."

He added: "You can't think about the problems of the world in that kind of language."

At a panel presided over by Louis Martin-Chauffier of France, writers explored the ways literature and the social sciences deal with the nature of contemporary man. The chairman made a plea for literary people to keep up the standards of style in writing.

Ralph Ellison, the American novelist, told of watching on television a reporter interview a young boy who was involved in a riot in Jersey City. The boy was asked why he took part in the riot.

"Why?" he said. "Because I'm culturally deprived and I'm from a broken family that is matriarchally dominated."

Mr. Ellison added: "The reporter was just getting the feedback from the sociological jargon that is going around."

Leon Edel, professor of English at New York University, spoke of "the torrent of received ideas." He told of visiting Walden Pond and finding on the shore several trailers with television masts, and of going to Hadrian's Villa in Italy and finding it surrounded by young Italians strolling with transistor radios tuned to rock 'n' roll.

"These are the forces arrayed against us," he said. Leda Mileva of Bulgaria observed that "many modern books are a cry of despair. That reminded her of the sick man who went to a doctor. He was suffering from melancholy,

and the physician said that the cure was for him to go to the variety show.

"That is no good," he replied "because I am the clown." She added: "Yet writers are healthy, as is proved by their ability to travel the great distance to be here."

Latin American writers asked for the holding of a special symposium during the afternoon, which was supposed to be a holiday for the congress. They explained that this was the first chance many of them ever had to meet.

Manuel G. Barbantin of Chile expressed the dominant view of the meeting, when he complained that Latin American writers were relatively unknown in centers of culture in the United States and Europe.